

HeadStart Backers Battle Bush Plan

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BY KAREN BERKOWITZ - Evanston Review

Evanston advocates for early childhood education are furiously e-mailing and telephoning congressional lawmakers in hopes of defeating a Republican plan that many contend would "dismantle" the Headstart program by placing its future in the hands of cash-crunched states.

Headstart providers nationally have accused the Bush administration of using "stale data" to support the argument that Headstart needs to resharpen its focus on academic readiness for the nation's poorest children.

The Headstart reauthorization bill, known as the School Readiness Act, would shift the program to the U.S. Department of Education. While the measure originally called for sending block grants directly to the states, the revised plan would test the funding change in eight states, which could fold Headstart into their state-funded preschool programs.

"The perception that Headstart was not focused on preparing children for school is really an incorrect perception," said Martha Arntson, executive director of the Childcare Network of Evanston, the grant recipient for the Early Headstart program in Evanston.

"I don't think the government has enough data from Headstart," Arntson said. "They may say that 30 percent of Headstart youngsters are not ready for kindergarten, but they don't mention that the other 70 percent are. It skews the public perception."

Currently, local Headstart programs receive funds directly from the federal government, which administers the programs through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

At District 65's Joseph E. Hill Education Center, about 136 children three to five years of age are served in full- and half-day Headstart classes. The federal dollars supporting the program are funneled through North Suburban CEDA.

Two Early Headstart programs coordinated by other agencies serve an additional 88 clients - some infants and toddlers under 3 years old, some pregnant women or teen mothers.

The Early Headstart programs are offered through the Infant Welfare Society at its Teen Baby Nursery and Baby Toddler Nursery. Early Headstart clients also are served through the Child Care Center of Evanston Home Day Care Network.

Helps parents work

To qualify for Headstart services, income must be at or below federal poverty guidelines, now about \$11,800 for a single mother with one child and \$18,400 for a family of four. In addition to the preschool experiences provided youngsters, Headstart programs help parents enter the work force, link families with health-care providers and generally help parents make the transition from welfare and dependency to self-sufficiency and work, according to Arntson.

"Headstart has very high standards for quality early childhood programming that is not just focused on the child, but is focused on the entire family," said the administrator. "By calling it the School Readiness Act, it doesn't account for the comprehensive services that Headstart provides to families. Headstart is perhaps the only place that families can access those services through supportive referrals."

A vote on the latest version of HR 2210, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Michael Castle (R-Delaware), has twice been postponed in the U.S. House of Representatives amid a flurry of opposition.

Lobbying fiercely against the changes have been the National Headstart Association, the Illinois Headstart Association and other advocacy organizations.

Opponents fear that state lawmakers trying to plug their own budget shortfalls will be tempted to divert block grant funds or use the money as a reason to cut back on existing state resources for early childhood programs.

Opponents also worry that the inconsistency of state performance standards could accelerate Headstart's demise if the results posted by state programs are unimpressive.

Headstart providers also object to the small increase proposed in federal funding and a provision that would allow faith-based organizations running Headstart programs to consider religion in hiring employees.

While Evantson's representative in the House, Janice Schakowsky, R-9th, opposes HR 2210, as are other House Democrats, Arntson said it's a mistake for constituents to feel that they don't need to place the call.

"In fact, we do need to call because she needs to understand how important it is that we not dismantle Headstart. Because," said Arntson, "Headstart - as we know it and do it - would be dismantled."